THE DISCREET HORTORS OF TEACHING
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

an intercultural case study

Repeat after me:
“If I had any common sense, I would not learn English.”

Illustration by Wilhelm Busch
Dan MacLeod writes about a chance encounter on a plane and learns about pigeonholing, the act of choosing people not for who they are, but what they represent. As he describes it, it’s a far more sophisticated form of stereotyping.

SIETAR France is organizing an international congress on frontiers and identities in Lille from the 29th of October to the 1st of November this year. If you’re interested in this growing field of study and want to know more, click on page 17.

Teaching your mother tongue

Perhaps the best way to become an interculturalist is to teach your mother tongue abroad — you’ll learn more about yourself than at any other time in your life.

Surviving in a foreign land, unfamiliar responsibilities as a teacher, unsure expectations about cross-cultural relationships. Add the challenge of translating a linguistic reality which comes naturally to you but, to others, is an incoherent code of inconsistencies. It can be exhausting, even a nightmare. However, the experience of grappling with your verbal world and explaining it to non-native speakers is like no other. You emerge as a more “rounded” person. And it may have been the best decision in your life.

"The discreet horrors of teaching the English language" is a satirical look at the job and the language, which is far less logical than you think. Don’t believe me? Click on page 13 and start reading.

Ursula Brinkmann is our interviewee for this issue. She’s a SIETAR member who specializes in developing instruments that assess our ability to adapt to unfamiliar situations, as well as methods that help mold both strengths and weaknesses into competencies. Go to page 3 to see how she perceives the attitudes, approaches and solutions that generate shared commonality in an increasingly multi-cultural world.

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Ursula Brinkmann

An interview with one of the leading specialists in intercultural interventions

Intercultural competence is increasingly recognized in the academic and business communities as being one of the most important skills required in the global marketplace. What counts today is not just professional know-how, rather the ability to adapt that knowledge to unfamiliar situations and “strange” attitudes.

But how do you ascertain a person’s suitability for working in a multicultural setting? Social researchers have been busy creating a variety of methods to measure sensitivity toward culture differences and the ability to deal with them.

Dr. Ursula Brinkmann has developed just such an assessment tool. Together with her Dutch partner, Oscar van Weerdenburg, she created the ‘Intercultural Readiness Check’, a unique questionnaire for developing four key intercultural competencies. Its current version draws on input from 13,000 people from around the world, which is used for analyzing the potential traits of intercultural competences. It is so well-constructed that it’s become one of the leading cultural assessment instruments today.

But can an assessment tool also develop intercultural competence by means of an action plan and follow-up learning? What sort of feedback does a person need to translate talent into competence? Most important, does the instrument promote self-awareness of one’s intercultural evolution?

These are questions I wanted ask Dr Brinkmann, who also happens to be a passionate supporter of SIETAR, not to mention a SIETAR Netherlands board-member.

Tell us about your early childhood and what laid the groundwork for you to become an intercultural researcher.

I think a good deal of intercultural professionals these days actually started in this profession because they were born and raised in a provincial area, a completely monocultural environment away from big cities. As for myself, I come from a small town, Winterberg, about 140 km north of Frankfurt, and 140 km east of Cologne. It’s almost in the middle of Germany, or as some people say, in the middle of nowhere. It has a couple of hills, 600 to 800 meters, and is known as a mini-Schwarzwald because many tourists, especially the Dutch, go skiing there.

The town has its own distinct culture and a fascinating sense of belonging. Not “that’s what I want to have for the rest of my life”, rather a feeling of coming home, people know you, you are this or that daughter, nothing has to be explained. It can be a bizarre contrast with the clients I coach who travel around like expats, hopping from place to place. I love to hold these two things in contrast — my deep roots from the middle of nowhere and being in contact with people from so many different countries.
As I grew up, two factors probably prepared me for the work I'm doing now. One is my mother. She always wanted to finish high school, go to university, have a profession. But her father, who was otherwise a great person, didn't have the vision of allowing his daughters to further their education, so my mother and her sister basically stayed put. She passed on to me this desire to go out and be curious about the world.

You could say that you mother's experience motivated you to do something else and be interested in others. Yes, a high need to achieve and to be a bit independent. The other factor that really left an impression was a book of amusing stories I discovered in my parents' house, "Mal etwas anderes" (Something else for a change) by Kurt Kusenberg. I really enjoyed the simplicity and surprises in these strange tales. And I began to think, "Yeah, why not something else?"

At the age of 14, I took part in a school exchange with Buchanan, a small town in Chicago, near Chicago. I lived with an American family for three weeks, went to school on the yellow bus, participated in school-life and the action in the hallways. It was lovely, it was fantastic. That was a real, different experience.

When I started university. I crossed the so-called "Weisswurst Äquator" (white-sausage equator) from the north of Frankfurt to the south. Moving from Winterberg in Westphalia to Heidelberg in Baden-Württemberg was my first real culture shock, I felt I was in another country. People didn't have a clue where I came from, they spoke differently, I could hardly understand them, and they didn't get my jokes. They would hop over to France for a quick meal. It was a completely different frame of reference and it took some time to get used to.

I did my studies in clinical and pedagogical psychology. Then I met Oscar, a Dutch exchange student, who is now my partner in life as well as in our company, Intercultural Business Improvement. When he went back to Holland, I tried to get closer to Amsterdam. There was a Max Planck Institute on the border where I could do my master's thesis in psycholinguistics and later my PhD on language acquisition, how children learn their first language.

Even though I had a diploma in clinical psychology, I quickly realized I had no idea of language. I had to try to understand how linguists analyze language. I enjoyed that much more than conventional psychology. Linguistics is beyond conscious conception. You try to understand what is in this black box but you can never open it. The different sentences, different constructions, is it grammatical? The rules, the exceptions, does it still make sense?
How did you jump from children’s language acquisition to interculturalism?
Well, after seven years in psychology and seven in linguistics, I wanted something else for a change. I was already living in the Netherlands and I began to take an interest in the culture, how was it relevant to my own life. But the biggest influence was Fons Tompenaars. Oscar had been working with him and I got to know his thinking. What I like is the thinking in opposites, then taking it to the next step, the reconciliation approach. How can we reconcile opposites at the higher levels?

Also concepts like individualism, particularism-universalism, they are certainly interesting differences in thinking and values. I did some freelance work for him, which was very stimulating. Later on, Oscar and I started Intercultural Business Improvement while he continued to work with Fons on a freelance basis.

The name contains the word “Improvement”. Could you tell me how you manage this in a workshop?
As a psychologist, I was not so interested in how cultures differ, more in how individuals manage their differences. I wanted to look at the intercultural experience from a new perspective — what are the strengths and weaknesses people have and how can you translate these into competencies?

How did you and Oscar develop the Intercultural Readiness Check?
We wanted to develop the ability of individuals and groups to work across cultures. We needed to assess abilities first. We developed a self-assessment tool that provides bitter-versus-sweet feedback on four vital competencies.

First, there is Intercultural Sensitivity, which assesses a person’s interest in other people and their cultural background, with attention to both verbal and non-verbal signals. Intercultural Communication is the second and it measures how people observe their communication style.

Building Commitment is the third — recognizing how people try to influence their social environment and reconciling the needs of different stakeholders.

Finally, there is Managing Uncertainty, which gauges acceptance of diverse environments and cross-cultural complexity.

‘The Intercultural Readiness Check’ evaluates four competencies on how individuals manage cultural differences.

According to the research of the last 40 years, there are three things you need to do to be effective abroad. Connect with new people. Perform your tasks. Enjoy the interaction. This is what I call the ‘CPE’ model of intercultural effectiveness: connecting, performing and enjoying.
The feedback helps individuals and organizations take the next step. The trainer can tailor content according to results and formulate a structure for development during an assignment abroad. This can also help in relations which are on-going but unsatisfactory.

What gives me a good feeling about the IRC is we have a conversation with each participant, you often hear their story and struggles they’ve had. It can be an immigrant with culture shock or a project manager with a negative team-experience. We can help them with that.

I’m intrigued by the third element: building commitments. From my experiences in conducting German-U.S. workshops, the two seem to have divergent ideas about commitment. When an American asks a German if something can be delivered by a certain date and gets the answer “No problem”, it means the schedule will be respected. If an American says “No problem”, it means “We’ll do our best.” So maybe it won’t get done, something which Germans simply can’t understand. How do you reconcile the two perspectives?

Germans have the luxury that, when they agree on something, they stick to schedule, they have the same understanding of the importance of time. Because they are very task-oriented, Germans can devote themselves more to deadlines. At the end of the day, you know what everyone is going to do to get this thing done.

In the U.S. and other countries, the needs and priorities are different. We’re expected to continuously invest in a relationship. You link to one another and say: “Listen, I said I would get it to you by next Thursday, something has come up, how can we deal with this?” Building commitments allows you to understand all the factors, then work flexibly and quickly.

The second part is how constructively you approach cross-cultural conflicts — the concept of shared commonality in a global project. It’s going into conversation with someone where you have different ideas of how to do something and you somehow need to come up with a shared idea. When you disagree, it’s going to be difficult but you have to approach things in a way that signals you’re focused on solutions, not problems. Americans and Germans working together have to have a tough discussion without killing the relationship.

A very interesting perspective. But for participants to appreciate this, you have to prepare the groundwork: what is culture, how does it influence us? Then teach them skill sets. This takes time. And interventions are becoming shorter, companies try to squeeze training into half-day sessions...
Two points here. People are learning how to deal with intercultural issues more quickly than ten years ago. There’s at least a superficial acceptance of differences and commonality on how to deal with certain issues. People in a multinational team proudly say, “Look, we come from different cultures and work well together. We know how to handle international conference calls, how to handle drop box, etc. That is a real achievement.”

But if you want to do business effectively, you need to calculate extra training time. The big advantage of a team with one national culture is there’s an intuitive understanding on how to go about things. What I mean is that all of us have had 20, 30 years of what I call ‘severe training’ in our national culture. Everyday at school we get a feedback on how we are expected to perform later at work. At home, we get daily comments on being on time, being late, going to church, not going to church, whatever, it’s about getting us ready on how to function in society.

Put people together from diverse backgrounds and there are misunderstandings that go back to the way they were raised and educated. The management problems are evident but some companies prefer to ignore them and hope for the best. The result is frustrated employees, unsatisfactory cooperation and a poorly carried-out project.

In another words, effective intercultural intervention requires more time than most people realize.
Certainly. To go from awareness to concrete action. Most people want to be open, learn about other cultures. But they also run into frustrations. You show them concrete things to do that seem like nothing but can really help. Watching a foreign movie and trying to identify cultural patterns. Having conversations but not using the word “no” for a whole day. Using methods for dialogue that help them to explore their perspectives and agree on how to move on. We’re on a life-long journey. As long as we keep taking the next steps, we’re on the right track.

Lastly, you and Oscar have just written a book on intercultural competence training. Tell us about it.
Well, Palgrave Macmillan contacted us two years ago, asking whether we’d be interested in writing about our work on intercultural readiness. They liked our plan and so we spent the better part of 2013 writing the book, “Intercultural Readiness: Four competences for working across cultures”. The book combines a thorough introduction to the four competences with our research findings, which makes very clear that being interculturally competent is not just the responsibility of talented or dedicated individuals, but also a matter of the organizational context. We are very excited about the book and hope the general public will be as well.
How an Italian business person can succeed in Japan
A short overview of Japanese business culture

by Alessia Girtelli

Alessia Girtelli is an Italian student studying international and intercultural relations. She submitted this article on how Italian business people should approach the Japanese.

Business environment

In general, Japanese, unlike Westerners, don’t like meeting newcomers. And if that newcomer is a foreigner (Gaikokujin), it’s even more difficult. For Japanese trust is essential in a partnership. When starting a negotiation with the Japanese, it is advisable to be introduced by a person who they trust. And before they start thinking about an agreement, the Japanese will take a lot of time to evaluate their partners’ moral and ethical behavior. Italians should be conscious of this behavior because it could be misinterpreted as a waste of time, or a signal that the Japanese are not interested in the negotiation.

In all Japanese business meetings, punctuality is extremely important; it is expected that people arrive before the arranged time. The first meeting is considered as a way to establish an atmosphere of friendship, harmony and trust. Several meetings are needed to arrive to a general agreement.

As for greetings, Japanese are very aware of Western habits and will often shake hands. However, the bow is their traditional way of greeting. Business cards are held and given with both hands after the bow or handshake. It is very important that your business card shows your title and position in the company. Japanese wish to know which level of the company you belong to as business and personal relations in a Japanese company are hierarchical. Older people have higher status than younger ones.

It is common for negotiation to start with middle managers, whose task is to “taste the water”. As negotiations continue, a higher-level manager will be introduced. Interpreters are acceptable, especially during the first meetings. Concerning the contract, it is perceived as a beginning of a business relationship, not a final agreement, expressing a clear and simple statement of intention. Japanese often attach equal importance to oral agreements as to written ones.

Another important difference between Italian and Japanese business customs is taking decision. Italians, like western countries, usually take decision in a “zooming out way”. This means that they start with details to arrive at a general idea. The Japanese, on the other hand, start with a general idea and then moving closer to details, in a “zooming in way”.

All decision-making is done by consensus, making the group important. Everybody in a group expresses their opinion and contributes to the final decision. This usually takes much time and Italian business people could misinterpret this slow decision-making process, thinking their Japanese counterparts are not interested in the partnership.
Japanese appreciate it when a foreign partner shows interest in their culture and company. Demonstrating your knowledge and if possible, talking about historical links between the countries or companies will be positively interpreted.

Another important aspect of the first business meeting is the ritual of gift giving. Gifts are exchanged during the first meeting, generally at the end. Japanese will present their offerings in a modest manner, using both hands and making a slight bow. It is advisable that foreigners do the same. Japanese may hesitate before accepting a gift; they do this to seem more polite, not because they don’t want it.

**Etiquette**
During a conversation nodding is important, and moments of silence are considered natural and useful. Italian communication style is just the opposite, as moments of silence are considered embarrassing.

Looking at Japanese directly in the eyes is not the norm. Too much eye contact can be interpreted as communicating defiance or disagreement, while averting your gaze is considered a sign of respect.

Try to not stand too close a Japanese person and avoid physical contact. Demonstrating affection in public, like hugging or shoulder slapping, is considered rude. And showing the sole of shoes in Japanese culture considered really rude. This is the reason why is recommended to sit with both feet on the floor and never put your ankle over knee.

Because the number 4 is connected to death in the Japanese language, it is strongly advisable to avoid using it or give four of anything. It is for this reason Alfa Romeo, wanting to expand into Asian market, changed the name of the Alfa Romeo 164 to 168.

**Business lunches and dinners**
Business lunches and dinners are very common among Japanese businessman. It’s a way to get to know a potential partner’s behavior in a “non-working situation”. If the invitation say “casual”, it is recommended to dress smart.

Toasting is an important moment and expresses thanks to guests. It is advisable wait for the toast before start drinking. After the honored guest has started eating, the other guests can then begin.

If someone leaves his or her glass or plate empty, it means the person wants to drink or eat more. If you don’t want drink or eat anymore, don’t leave your glass or plate completely empty.

As oppose to Italian dining etiquette, it is acceptable to slurp noisily at a Japanese meal. And if someone burps, it means that the person really appreciates the dish.
Pigeonholing

by Dan MacLeod

I got up early, packed a flight-bag and a suitcase, grabbed my typewriter and U-Bahned it to Berlin-Tegel. I flew to Frankfurt, then Amsterdam, then trudged around Schiphol airport until I found a baggage-check for the suitcase and typewriter — I’d be back in two days to pick them up on my way to Paris. Shedding the 30 pounds allowed me to run, a good thing since I almost missed the plane to Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Now I’m on the plane, tired and sweaty. Apart from toast with my landlady seven hours ago, I have nothing in my stomach. It’s a seven-hour flight, then 40 minutes by car. I’ll be getting to bed at 6 a.m. Berlin-time, a 24-hour day with jet-lag to follow. All that to say the last thing I needed was a fight over the armrest.

With an Ugly American, worse luck. He looked exactly like what he was — an oil company exec. Around sixty, short grey hair, business suit without the tie. He was maybe 6’2, 240 pounds, and I was wedged between him and the wall of the plane.

Funny how when you’re a kid, the window-seat is magic but how, at 37, it’s an exercise in claustrophobic frustration. He had a meaty forearm and, sitting back down, made sure it covered our shared armrest. I got settled in, then added my forearm to the equation, pushed his back halfway while saying “Excuse me.”

Once he realized he was under attack, he resisted, it was a stale-mate. I glanced at him and saw a bulldog face in frown-mode, avoiding eye-contact. I thought, “It’s gonna be a long flight.”

“It’s gonna be a long flight,” he said, “so maybe we can take turns with the armrest.”

He introduced himself, we shook hands, he asked me why I was going to Minnesota. He was from just outside St. Paul but worked in Saudi. It was oilman lingo. He worked 70 hours a week but his company flew him home twice a year for eight weeks with the family. Not only that, they paid for business class — he made $3,500 just by downgrading to coach.

He was an engineer who’d gone into management and he was far more open-minded than I originally thought. He was, in fact, an interculturalist. Except in 1994 he thought of it as “making things run smoothly in a unique context”. He dealt with ex-pats as well as locals, baksheesh and all that. He said it was really just psychology. “Like with the armrest. You weren’t going to back down. I offered a compromise, turned an ordeal into a working relationship on a long flight.”

He was already successfully crossing professions. Engineers don’t necessarily make good administrators but he found the
work fascinating and his personal culture made him a reader and knower of all the latest research into group-efficiency and individual performance profiles.

He was also at one of the farthest-flung outposts the planet has to offer and it wasn’t just the money, he’d always wanted to see the world. Once again, the strong relationship between psychology and interculturalism: he was interested in people. In business terms, a shrewd judge of character. In human terms, a curious, empathetic listener.

I’d been getting his story but he wanted to know about me, said I intrigued him. I’d already told him I was a journalist “between contracts”, spending the summer perfecting my German on a Goethe-Institut scholarship.

I was sure he was a Republican, probably golfed at an exclusive club in the St. Paul suburbs, probably went to church, one of those Protestant ones. In other words, my political and cultural opposite as an Irish-Italian from Boston who, born a generation later, was also an atheist.

That we were both Americans was less inviting to me than if he’d been European. The civil rights movement and the Vietnam war left the U.S. polarized; twelve years of Reagan-Bush, Christian Right backlash made it permanent, a culture-war. But I realized he was the kind of person I could exchange with from diametrically-opposite chairs at the table, a kindred spirit. Me if I’d have been raised as he was?

So I told him about public broadcasting in Canada where, since my first year, a decade of government cuts had brought on five waves of network lay-offs. I’d weathered the storm by jumping from English to French radio, then to French television, writing and producing close to a hundred current affairs documentaries from a dozen countries while publishing features with papers like “La Presse” and the “Boston Globe”.

He nodded, proceeded to distill my résumé. “You have two university degrees, speak three languages, you can do all these things—print, radio, television...And you’re about a year from being unemployable.”

He was translating business culture, what I looked like to an executive. “In your world, this may make sense. And you’ve had real success. But I look at your c.v. and I see two years here, two years there... there’s no constancy.”

He talked to me about pigeonholing, choosing people not for who they are but what they represent. “Everyone says you can’t judge a book by its cover but does just that. Because it’s easier, because it’s risk-free, but mostly due to time and budget constraints. Trying to fit square pegs in round holes...
Pigeonholing... — continued

What’s wrong with this picture?

went out in the ’70s. My advice to you? Take a lesser job, stay five years, show you can fit in.”

What was funny was we were buddies by now. I’d been told a limousine would meet me at the airport. Would it be a car or an actual limousine? He said it might be either, got excited at the prospect of my getting a real limo, waited with me to see, said his wife was already asleep anyway. We stood around talking for another 20 minutes before the Lincoln sedan arrived. He was more disappointed than I was.

... I was in Minnesota because American Public Radio wanted advice on re-inventing itself as Public Radio International. People talked about past projects, a reporter from New York described a National Public Radio series about two black teenagers from a Chicago ghetto. He’d given them tape-recorders to do spoken diaries with recorded bits of family-life. He won an award but two very bizarre things happened.

Black employees protested against a white person portraying a reality only African-Americans could understand. Obvious stereotyping, obviously absurd, but he said he wouldn’t be allowed to do the series today.

Also, other reporters called saying they wanted to do the same sort of story. Then they asked for the kids’ phone numbers — they wanted to use the same kids. As if they were the only kids who could talk about the ghetto. I thought of that when I heard some people think a cross-cultural comparison of two countries applies only to those two countries.

The point of investigation is to take what’s learned and apply it elsewhere. Extrapolate. It’s like music. Once you know how scales work, it doesn’t matter what key it’s in. But you have to be open-minded about concepts.

Unfortunately, people still have a tendency to compartmentalize. Léonora Miano recently became the first African-born novelist to win the Femina, a major French prize. She’s using the spotlight to talk about lesser-known black authors. She says publishers usually choose one black writer for their stable, then close the door. They worry about making money in the market as it is instead of developing new markets by diversifying readership. What seems like open-mindedness is almost the opposite.

Social pigeonholing isn’t the same as stereotyping — it’s not a reflex, it’s thought out. From a comedy standpoint, the best example is when tv cameras pan across the crowd at the Republican National Convention. You always see about a dozen non-white faces. Republicans think this represents diversity.
The Discreet Horrors of Teaching the English Language

An intercultural case study

by Patrick Schmidt

Let me state a simple fact: the teaching of English has become the world’s fastest growing industry. Classrooms are jammed with millions of eager learners wishing to master and speak this language, which was considered as “the inadequate and second rate tongue of peasants” for centuries. Then the Beatles came along. Today English has become the most important language in the world.

But few people realize how difficult it is for all but native speakers to follow its complexities. Combat-hardened teachers will tell you that, despite the universal impression that learning English is easy, it is not. For most students, the language appears to be an incoherent code of inconsistencies, a total disaster from a learning point of view.

Hard to believe? Think about the simple phrase used when meeting people for the first time -- “How do you do?”

How do I do what? It’s impeccable logic but the questioner will be taken aback if you reply that way. Upon analysis, not only is the question horribly incomplete, but the standard answer — to simply say “How do you do” back — makes no sense at all.

This is only for starters. Trying to teach phonetic and spelling rules to a foreigner can best be described as grotesque. For instance, if an English teacher went to the blackboard and wrote an agglomeration of letters like tchst, sthm, and tchph, you would think two things: 1. these letters are totally unpronounceable. 2. the teacher must be crazy. Yet these letters are used every day in words like matchstick, asthma, and catchphrase.

Despite so-called phonetic rules, the odds of pronouncing words correctly are almost as bad as those of hitting the jackpot in Las Vegas. The following examples demonstrate the absurdities:

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<th>Written</th>
<th>Pronounced</th>
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<td>ache</td>
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<td>busy</td>
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<td>bury</td>
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<td>enough</td>
<td>in af</td>
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<tr>
<td>read</td>
<td>red or ri:d</td>
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Then you have the problem of which pronunciation is correct. Consider a “girl” on an around-the-world tour. In the U.S. and Canada, she’d be gurl, but a gel in England and Australia, a gull in Ireland, a gill in South Africa and a gairull in Scotland.

The obvious conclusion is that the English spelling-versus-pronunciation relationship is so treacherously erratic, it’s a waste of time to think of rules. The best strategy is simply to stumble on hoping someday to understand the language’s shameless, yet charming, contradictions.

Another wrinkle which adds insult to injury is the learner’s being caught in the middle of the American-British firing line concerning correct
usage. And it’s not like the two are similar. Most people listening to the BBC News would describe the tone as refined, sophisticated, spoken by the elite. News reporters on American networks are far more caffeine-fed and often sound like nervous sportscasters.

Historically, the British have always felt superior in their use of the language. Infamous satirist Samuel Johnson voiced popular contempt in 1769, describing Americans as “a race of convicts and ought to be thankful for anything we allow them short of hanging”.

Agree or not, you’re forced to learn that, in Britain, one writes programme, favour, cheque and night, whereas in America it’s program, favor, check and, on commercial signs, nite. Should you have the bad luck to use British spelling in America, or vice-versa, you might well be scolded or in the worst scenario tarred and feathered, an experience I would wish on no one.

And then there’s legalese, which can be added to the list of the world’s greatest tortures. Lawyers are proud of their precise formulations but basically it’s mumbo-jumbo double-talk — terms like “the party of the first part,” “for and on behalf of” and “including but not exclusive to.” It has a tendency to make even native English-speakers feel totally illiterate.

Then again, the problems mentioned above are peanuts compared with the famous “present perfect”— a nightmare for English teachers and a veritable Waterloo for their students, all of whom think a sentence like “We are in London since four days” is absolutely splendid and pleasing to the ear. They don’t understand the look of shock on the faces of English-speakers upon hearing it.

When I explain the right way to say it is “We have been in London for four days”, students seem to think I’m suffering from some strange disease. Not only do they find the rule hard to accept, they insist they’ve never heard of it...no matter how many times it’s repeated. Still, if a teacher has great patience and a winning personality, a miracle sometimes occurs and students eventually use the present perfect correctly.

Finally, the mistake that drives English teachers everywhere right up the wall is the fetish of putting “would” in the subordinate clause of a conditional sentence. “If I would be rich, I would be happier” is guaranteed to make English-speakers wince in pain but, once again, students are blithely unaware of the fingernails-on-blackboard sound. If they were to use their ears, they would have an easier time of it.

Which brings me back to my main point: due to its incoherent, crazy logic, English is an extremely difficult language. Learning it should be limited to those who possess exceptional intelligence coupled with a high resistance to frustration. But how does one identify such exceptional people?

Are you still reading? You’re one of them.
This excellent little series of compact guides is enriched by Joanna Sell’s particularly well-crafted content. The country has resonances in my ancestry. At least on the surface, things change quite quickly and how deep values are manifest in the fashion of the day is always worth a new look when traveling and working abroad or virtually with colleagues at a distance. Sell provides a “quick fix” without promoting stereotypes.

Sell has packed as much as possible into this short format, and while there are the requisite tips, cultural dimensions, and behavioral comments, what I found richest was the fact that the description of the historical and political contexts and its cultures, and the author’s ability to be as up-to-date as possible with current tendencies, trends, and generational differences. Poles have maintained their identity better than their borders over the centuries, a reality echoed by the complaint of my Polish immigrant grandfather who was wont to say, “Poland was crucified between two thieves.” This is not paranoia.

To the outside observer, it may seem like there is a revolution going on between generations. This is rarely the case, but one in fact finds that the same values have taken on totally new applications and adapt themselves to the needs of the current moment. The author is fully aware of this, and points it out to the reader comparing behaviors of more West-focused Generation X and Y with those of the elder generation who entered the workforce before 1989 and retained both the imprint of socialist dynamics and creative strategies for circumventing them.

Speaking of up-to-date relevance, there is for example a very short but incisive section on contemporary businesswomen in Poland and their relationship to traditional male chivalry. There is also a good awareness of the fact that culture is about but not simply about “kiss a bow and shake hands,” and knowing how to do these things in other people’s worlds. Thus there are pages acquainting us with important Polish personalities at various moments in history from the 15th century to the present age, from Chopin, the recent pope (of significance in this traditionally Catholic country), even to today’s sports idols.

Europe’s fastest growing and one of its most thriving economies, Poland was the only European country to avoid recession in the wake of the 2009 downturn which in fact slowed the brain drain of young talent westward. One of Poland’s challenges will continue to be moving forward in shaping successful multicultural teams and working in global environments despite its being such a very monocultural country. Fortunately, it is my experience that the younger generation of Polish professionals is intensely interested in talented when it comes to doing the requisite work for success in our international environment. SIETAR Poland is one of the most vitally active groups in this worldwide organization of interculturalists. Joanna Sell, who serves on the board of SIETAR Europa as well, is strong testimony to Poland’s new outward-looking confidence.
Globalization is rapidly breaking down our vision of a world with well-defined national, cultural and linguistic barriers. While some claim this has generated a “global village” of instantaneous contact and business opportunities, others find international commerce brings with it the demons of a modern Pandora’s box—a volatile, uncertain, dangerous world. Whatever the perception, the modern manager is increasingly being asked to work in multicultural environments, something most aren’t prepared for.

Many, in their desperation, turn to the countless publications offering advice on international give-and-take. Most are good, some are bad; few manage the trick of imparting an exceptional depth of knowledge while wasting not words in the process. The Mindful International Manager is an amazing guide. It packs the best research, ideas and practices into a concise 234 pages, virtually everything you need to know to work on the international scene.

Authors Franklin and Comfort are both experienced interculturalists, who have translated our too often abstract theories in a simple, conversational style that brings key concepts into sharp focus. What emerges are new insights and perspectives, an alternative experience is generated. The reader is elated to experience that so-solid feeling of real comprehension...at last.

“Mindfulness” is the leitmotiv that runs throughout. With roots in Buddhism, the authors define it as being acutely sensitive to our own and others’ behavior. This is the key to communicating across cultures, the co-construction of meaning and understanding. It is of utmost importance that the mindful international manager consciously negotiate meaning — get what is actually being communicated. Having explained that, the authors cover the knowledge needed to appreciate context. The first four chapters deal with mindset, examining how culture, personality and situation produce meaning, which in turn influences perception and behavior. The next nine chapters look into how readers can develop both skills and basic competencies. Topics are presented in a practical manner: structuring and organizing teams, switching roles, supporting your team, group feedback, cooperation, leadership across cultures, dealing with conflicts in other cultures.

Question-vignettes ask the reader to judge situations, assessing personal reflexes and attitudes on a scale of 1 to 10. The game-like atmosphere reinforces the interactive nature of the learning. A total of eleven case studies are given for the reader to reflect on...with judicious solutions and “best practices” to be found at the back of the book. A thorough, 27-page glossary is another treasure, defining business and intercultural terms in refreshing, non-theoretical ways that even native speakers will enjoy.

Interacting with this guide is much like going through a MBA program — not only is your awareness increased, your repertoire of behaviors and strategies is substantially widened. A definite must for all, whether the undergraduate student or the international business veteran.

Reviewed by Patrick Schmidt
FRONTIERS & IDENTITIES: NAVIGATING WORLDS IN MOTION

LILLE, 29th October to 1st November, 2014

As the world becomes a more global place, events in one area can have a very rapid and direct impact on people living on the other side of the world. People are crossing and creating borders, encountering new frontiers both physically and virtually. Inequalities in the distribution of wealth are inciting millions of people to seek a better life outside their native country. The traditional and historical limits of borders and identities are being questioned as they change and become more or less permeable. In some places, forms of cultural isolationism appear to be gaining ground.

Within this more global world we have Europe; a Europe that is evolving rapidly and which will continue to evolve in ways which are difficult to anticipate. At the heart of this evolving Europe we find France, a country that has traditionally welcomed people from all around the world. The face of France is changing and creating new challenges and opportunities for the people who live and work there.

These changes may challenge our identities, our sense of belonging and our affiliations and raise questions for which there is no one, simple answer. Migrations are not all of the same nature. The differences between forced migration – unprepared, full of risks, driven by dreams that only very rarely come true – and professional or economic migration – prepared with the help of more and more qualified HR personnel and expatriate services – need to be more fully understood.

SIETAR-France is happy to welcome you to Lille, a truly international city strategically situated to be at the centre of the debates around the changing face of France and the place of the evolving Europe in today’s global world. Come and join the actors of the intercultural professions for 3 days of conferences, workshops and sharing of best practices as we explore together the implications for individuals, organizations and countries of the current changes to frontiers and identities and the challenges of navigating worlds in motion.

For more details on congress registration click below:
www.sietar-france.org
Call for Papers
III Congress SIETAR Polska

New Era of Expat

24 - 26 October 2014
Conference Centre: Golden Floor,
Millenium Plaza in Warsaw

Aim of the Congress:
The general aim is to address issues concerning certain areas of contemporary workforce migrations. The number of Poles undertaking employment abroad is on a steady rise. At the same time, an ever growing number of foreign employees come to work in Poland. The Congress is to be a forum for sharing views and experiences related to the increasing flexibility of labour market and the challenges workers face when undertaking employment beyond the boundaries of their native countries.

The Congress will be an opportunity to explore the issues from both a theoretical and practical perspective. We invite all researchers and practitioners - members of SIETAR, representatives of international and Polish companies, representatives of non-governmental organizations, diplomats and expats themselves - interested in the fields relevant to the main theme to take part in discussions. The Congress will be initiated by Prof. Grzegorz W. Kołodko, our distinguished keynote speaker, who, referring to the theme of contemporary economic migration will give a lecture on "Wandering World".

The suggested themes for presentations and workshops include:

- Expatriation and economic migration
- Employment of an expat: an investment or unnecessary cost?
- Competencies of an expat
- Being an expat – is it a conscious choice?
- The role of networking in expat’s environment
- Psychological results of expatriation
- Linguistic and cultural adaptation
- The role of cross-cultural training and relocation
- The challenges of expatriates coming back to their organizations

How to submit the paper:
We expect abstracts (250-300 words) of a presentation (20 min + 10 min discussion) or a workshop (90min) together with a short autobiography to be submitted by 20th of June 2014. Please use the attached form and send it under the title Call for papers to: kongres@sietar.pl Notification of acceptance will be sent out by 14th of July 2014. All chosen Presenters will be granted free admission for Congress.

Visit us on: www.sietar.pl
Events, workshops, congresses

SIETAR Europa's webinars
Sign up on the Sietar Europa website: http://www.sietareu.org/activities/webinars
3rd June: 7.00 – 8.30 pm (CET) Ursula Brinkmann, Juanita Wijnands and Yvonne van der Poel: “Intercultural Effectiveness = Connect x Perform x Enjoy”
26th June: 7.00 – 8.30 pm (CET) Livingstone Thompson: “Religion and economic success”
20th September: 4.00 pm – 5.30 pm (CET) Rudi Camerer and Judith Mader: “Language: Source of all misunderstanding”
26th November: 8.00 – 9.00 pm (CET) David Trickey: “The X-factor - why successful corporate expats need to be magically in two places at the same time (and how to do it)”

Konstanz, Germany
13-14 June, 2014
Dialogin International Conference Global Leadership Competence: Personal Qualities, Culture, Language This conference is to look into the personal qualities and competencies required to lead people and organisations across cultures. More information at http://www.dialogin.com/index.php?id=224

Bath, U.K.
23-27 June 2014 Developing Intercultural Training Skills This 5-day course is for those, who want to develop their knowledge and skills to design and deliver intercultural training into their current courses.
30 June - 4 July 2014 Designing and delivering intercultural training. This 5-day course is a follow up to the above course, also suitable for trainers who already have experience in the intercultural field. Both courses (from June on) are eligible for EU funding under the new Erasmus+ programme. More information at www.lts-training.com/ICTTcourse.htm or contact adrian.pilbeam@lts-training.com

Amsterdam, Holland
1 - 3 September 2014
Intercultural Communication: Diversity in Practice This 3-day course provides knowledge and skills for cross-cultural work in international teams, project management and education. More information at info@cic-amsterdam.com

Jena, Germany
2 - 4 October 2014
Willkommenskultur in Deutschland Sietar Deutschland is proud to announce its next forum: ‘Welcoming culture in Germany’. Topics are demographic change, diversity and the increasing number of immigrants. More information at http://www.sietar-deutschland.de/

Warsaw, Poland
24 October - 26 October 2014
Expats and Foreigners living and working abroad Sietar Polska is organizing this conference on what is needed for today’s manager to work effectively in an international environment. More information at http://www.sietar.pl/

Lille, France
29 October - 1 November 2014
Fontières et Identités, Repères dans un Monde en mouvement Sietar France is having its bi-annual congress with the theme of enhancing the dialogue of cultures. More information at www.sietar-france.org

Online Everyday
The SIETAR Europa group, discussing “Psychometric Testing - the Good, the Bad and the Ugly” on LinkedIn, has now over 6500 members. Plus it offers videos, articles, books, tools for the intercultural profession.

For more information, contact George Simons at diversophy@gmail.com

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